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A

Introduction

1 Understanding Policy Work

Hal Colebatch, Robert Hoppe and Mirko Noordegraaf

Policy as a handle on government

'Policy' has become one of the central ways in how we talk about government, presenting the process of government as a pattern of systematic action oriented to particular collective concerns. It is a central concept in a narrative of governing in authoritative and instrumental terms: Governments recognize problems and make decisions to bring public authority and resources to bear upon these problems, with 'policy' as the expression of these decisions. As we will see, this perspective embodies questions and puzzles for both practitioners and observers, but it occupies centre stage, constituting a framework within which policy concerns are discussed.

In a way, the policy perspective is an alternative to the more traditional 'politics' perspective on government that sees it as a competitive struggle for power and the capacity for allocation which goes along with it. Of course, the two cannot be totally separated, as the politics perspective considers one of the fruits of political success as the capacity to steer government through policy, and the policy perspective assumes that political leaders will want to shape the direction of government activity through policy choices. But the politics perspective tends to focus attention on the competitive struggle for the right to choose, while the policy perspective is more concerned with problem solving.

In this narrative of 'authoritative instrumentalism,' a central place is given to 'policymakers,' although it is not always clear who is being referred to. It also envisages that the policymakers will have 'policy advisers' and may also draw on the work of 'policy analysts.' We find this unduly specific and limiting in its vision. There are many people whose work is oriented toward policy: political leaders, bureaucrats, professional experts, advocates, interest group representatives, and others. These are the people we call *policy workers*. They may be employed by the government, or one of a range of bodies concerned about how the authority of government can be brought to bear on problems: think tanks, interest groups, professional bodies, community associations, in-

ternational organizations, etc. They may be activists, not employed in this sector at all, but committed to policy as a major part of their lives, though, in many cases, these people are drawn into paid employment, often because governments offer grants to issue-focused groups so that they can employ staff and more easily bring their perspective to bear in official circumstances.

Policy work is how these participants bring their diverse forms of knowledge to bear on policy questions but how this work is done is something that is learned from practice rather than from study. ‘You learn on the job,’ as one policy worker put it (Howard 2005: 10). This may be related to differences in the sorts of knowledge we have of the policy process, particularly between the detached, codified knowledge of the academic observer and the involved and (possibly tacit) experiential knowledge of the practitioner. This book presents both forms of knowledge to illuminate the work of policy, both for the outsider who wants to understand it and the insider who has to make it happen.

This introductory chapter first discusses the ways in which policy is understood and what these mean for the nature of policy work. It goes on to discuss the way policy work is institutionalized, and the collective nature of policy work, which can mean that policy workers find different sorts of accounts of their practice are presented, and that different accounts may make sense in different contexts. It then identifies the questions that this book raises – about policy, policy work and policy workers – and shows how the chapters in the book contribute to our growing understanding of policy work.

The policy narrative and policy work

The term ‘policy’ conveys a sense of clarity and stability, but its exact meaning (and its implications for policy work) is not always clear. It is generally situated within a paradigm that we can call ‘authoritative instrumentalism,’ which sees government as a mechanism for official problem solving, centered around decisions made by authorized leaders, with official practice seen as the ‘implementation’ of the decision (Friedrich 1963; Dye 1972; Hale 1988; Anderson 1997; Althaus, Bridgman and Davis 2008). Within this paradigm, policy is used to refer to:

- the goals or strategies of the leaders;
- specific acts such as decisions, announcements and statutes;
- an overriding logic of action (e.g., ‘our policy on the environment’);
- a structure of practice (e.g., ‘the school’s policy on late essays’).

In some of these uses, policy refers to something specific and tangible, that is expressed in a document, but used in other ways, it is more diffuse and has to be inferred from practice, so we find people distinguishing between 'formal,' written policy, and tacitly-understood unwritten policy. Or they may play one usage against another – e.g., criticizing structures of practice because they operate to undermine efforts to achieve stated goals. As a concept, policy would have to be considered what Levi-Strauss termed 'a floating signifier': its meaning depends on the context and the people involved.

So, to understand the work of policy, we have to look at the specific context in which it is done. The narrative of authoritative instrumentalism focuses on the leaders, who 'make policy' by the exercise of their authority; policy is said to be made when leaders or groups of leaders approve a proposal. But the narrative also recognizes that these proposals emerge from the work involved in governing, and are channeled through officials, whose function is to 'advise' political leaders. This means the recognition of a variety of 'policy advisors.' There are the functional experts in the field under review – medical scientists, social workers, marine ecologists, etc. – some of whom may well have been the instigators of the policy moves. There are also the people who can be called 'process experts,' skilled at generating policy proposals, steering them through the complex world of procedure and stakeholder opinion, and responding appropriately to the proposals of others. The policy movement in the US gave rise to a new cadre of 'decision experts' or 'policy analysts,' who were trained in graduate schools and claimed two linked forms of expertise. One was problem-focused – what is the nature of the problem that needs to be resolved, what do we know about it, what are the possible responses – and policy analysts were trained to generate data, about the problem, the responses, and the impact they might have. Their second field of expertise involves decision-making technology, so that alternative courses of action could be compared in terms of the resources needed to put them into effect and their probable outcomes. The policy analyst was considered an expert adviser who clarifies the problem, identifies the alternative courses of action, and systematically determines the optimal response: he or she would be comparable to the scientist in the laboratory, and engaged in 'speaking truth to power' (Wildavsky 1979).

The idea that systematic analysis should be incorporated into the governmental process was well received in the US, and 'policy analysis' was soon a recognized term, and became institutionalized both as a body of knowledge and as a field of practice, so that by the turn of the 21st century, Beryl Radin was reporting that policy analysis had 'come of age' (Radin 2000). The increased use of policy analysis by government induced non-government bodies to hire policy staff members who could 'speak the language.' The discourses

and norms of policy analysis became increasingly normalized through graduate programs subject to accreditation, through the homogenizing effect of conferences with attendees like the Association for Public Policy and Management, and through their incorporation into 'normal practice' (e.g., requirements that the federally funded activities of community groups be formally evaluated). Even academic writers who had reservations about this 'normal practice' sometimes felt obliged to instruct their readers in its use (e.g., Clemmons and McBeth 2001: chapter 8).

At the same time, it was not clear that what these people were actually doing was policy analysis. Radin discovered that people employed as policy analysts were usually engaged in a wide range of tasks, ranging from doing non-partisan research for legislators to educating the general public to lobbying for specific measures. This took them well beyond the realm of the formal methodology of choice in which they had been trained, which meant that (Radin 2000: 183):

There seems to be a disconnect between the analyst's perception of self-worth (often drawn from the rational actor model) and the real contribution that the actor makes in the nooks and crannies of the policy process. ... They seem to need a language to describe what they do and to convince themselves – as well as others – that they contribute to the process.

Some have concluded that their textbooks were 'really about theory rather than practice' (Howard 2005: 10). This friction between teaching and experience finds its way back into the texts, where it is found in the argument about rigor and relevance, which wonder whether it is more important to conform to the canons of social science research or to have an impact on the process even if it means that the research is 'quick and dirty.' Should the policy analyst build support for the optimal course of action based on the analytical data? This became an important question because policy analysts and researchers noticed that carefully crafted policy analyses were seldom used by decision makers. This generated a demand for policy analysts to make their findings more accessible to busy decision makers (e.g., Edwards 2005), but also to discuss the various ways that research findings might have an impact (e.g., Weiss 1982; 1991). Apparently, the demand for analysis was not simply meant to generate information on which to base decisions.

Information is gathered, policy alternatives are defined, and cost-benefit analyses are pursued, but they seem more intended to reassure observers of the appropriateness of actions being taken than to influence the

actions. ... choice in political institutions is orchestrated to assure its audience ... that the choice has been made intelligently, that it reflects planning, thinking, analysis and the systematic use of information (March and Olsen 1989: 48, 50).

In any case, it was clear that government employees who work on policy had numerous tasks including formal analysis, writing texts, managing the demands of the governmental process, and above all, interacting with other players involved in the issue. We will now turn to this dimension of policy work in the following section.

Governing as collective activity

In the narrative of authoritative instrumentalism, governing happens when 'the government' recognizes problems and decides to do something about them; what it decides to do is called 'policy.' The narrative constitutes an actor called 'the government' and attributes to it instrumental rationality: it acts as it does in order to achieve preferred outcomes. This is not necessarily the way that practitioners experience the policy world, however. One group reported: 'We identified over 100 organizations involved in creating Australian illicit drugs policy. Some are national, some at the state/territory or local community level, and others are international organizations' (McDonald et al. 2005: 11). There are many players in the game, not all of them are involved in supporting a single political leader, or even a collective called 'the government,' and not all of them are trying to 'make policy.' They may come from other public agencies, community organizations, professional bodies or business groups. They may be near-permanent players or they may be only involved in a specific issue. They may be skilled policy operators or new to the game. But the game is not random, and over time, it has a tendency to stabilize. The players develop relationships based on familiarity and trust, find common ground in the policy area, and recognize their mutual interdependence. Richardson and Jordan (1979) identified this process of clustering as 'the policy community.' Others have described 'issue networks' (Hecl 1974), 'sub-governments' (Coleman and Skogstad 1990), and 'advocacy coalitions' (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993), in any case, policy is now widely recognized as a multi-player game.

This dimension of policy has become more widely recognized. People in positions of authority are more likely to accept the fact that other participants are also involved in policy development, considering them 'stakeholders,' and

valuing the accomplishment of collectively generated outcomes. Even policy professionals probably spend more of their time negotiating with their counterparts in other agencies than they do in advising their bosses (Radin 2000). It is through these interactions with other participants that appropriate outcomes are arrived at. There is a clear link here between the interaction and the discourse because shared discourse facilitates interaction, and interaction tends to generate shared discourse. Haas (1992) argued that the international policy accomplishments involving chlorofluorocarbons reflects the existence of an 'epistemic community' of scientists who share a common understanding of the problem.

That is why this book is oriented toward 'policy work' as a broad field of practice, and to 'policy workers,' including the full range of those who find themselves engaged in the mobilization of public authorities involving issues of collective concern – that is, in the creation of policy. The focus is primarily on what they do rather than on the outcome – that is, on 'doing policy work' rather than 'coming up with a policy on X.'

Policy development as discursive construction

This last example points out the importance of policy development that involves a shared understanding of the problem. Policy work is about solving problems, but it is also about identifying areas of concern and applying known techniques of governing. This often has less to do with discovering phenomena than with re-evaluating already known phenomena. For instance, in a number of Western countries, policy on smoking has changed radically in recent decades, with restrictions on where smoking is permitted, massive increases in taxation, and widespread curbs on advertising. But these changes in regulations were only possible because of changes in the shared understandings about smoking; as smoking became less socially acceptable, it became increasingly possible to impose restrictions on it (and in turn, these made it even less acceptable). The changing attitude toward smoking reflected the activities of health professionals (some of whom worked for government agencies, many, however did not) and anti-smoking activists, but also complementary actions by insurance companies, trade unions and commercial landlords, many of whom do not commonly engage in policy development, but who contributed to the changing perception of smoking and the eventual regulatory framework.

Multiple accounts of policy work

This book recognizes that there is no one simple ‘good account’ of policy work; it involves a broad range of activities that can be described as policy work, and a variety of ways to make sense of these activities. A helpful distinction can be made between accounts that explain *outputs* and those that seek to explain *activity*. To describe the action as ‘policy-making’ is to highlight the apparent output – ‘developing a policy on X’ – and to see the participants as contributors in this development. In an ‘authoritative instrumental’ account, the action may be considered a sequential progression toward a desired output: identifying the issue, collecting data, framing options, evaluating, consulting, deciding and implementing. But an account focused on activity might reveal, that for many participants, participation is not about a policy on X, but on resisting it, or trying to use the interest in X to affect change in governmental practices in relation to p, q or r. The account would be framed in terms of interaction or conflict regarding the nature of the problem and the appropriate response, or resistance and distraction, or the search for a broadly acceptable outcome, or the ambiguity about the decisions made, and the potential for continuing the discussion.

The interest is not so much in how the participants collaborated to achieve a known and desired result, but how the ongoing interaction between the participants – involved in various ways, to various extents, and for various reasons – was marked by points of apparent firmness (‘decisions’), which were then taken to come up with a ‘policy’ on a particular issue.

Both of these accounts of policy work are valid; it just depends on the context (‘locus’) and the perspective adopted (‘focus’). The output-based account makes sense of the *result* (‘the government has decided...’); the activity-based account makes sense of the *experiences*. The output-based account is told from a single point of view; the activity-based account is told from a number of different perspectives. The output-based account reflects a systematic and orderly understanding of governing, while the activity-based account reflects experiential knowledge. And it is clear that different types of accounts can be given of the same activity. Policy work on climate change, for instance, could be described as ‘advising the Minister,’ ‘negotiating an agreed course of action with key stakeholders,’ ‘shifting the parameters of public attention,’ or even ‘tracing public perceptions’ or ‘spinning the effects of Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth*.’ In any case, they can all be considered equally descriptions of the activity. This suggests three things:

1. that accounts of policy work are not neutral; they reflect contexts and perspectives;

2. that giving accounts of policy practice are part of that practice and will involve experiential knowledge;
3. that analyzing policy work requires an understanding of the practices involved in producing accounts, both by the participants and by outside observers.

That is why this book seeks to place policy work in the broader narratives of governing, present systemic and experiential insights into policy practices, and reflect upon the nature of accounts given.

Our agenda for inquiry

This multiplicity of accounts points to the importance of empirical policy work studies, comparable to Mintzberg's pioneering research on the nature of managerial work (Mintzberg 1973) and the work of writers like Forester (1993) and Healey (1992), who showed that town planning was less about making plans than about mediating between players with different concerns who discovered they were participants in a broad process of urban change. Noordegraaf (2000a; 2000b; 2007) tracked how policy managers dealt with the demands of the job. Hoppe and Jeliazkova (2006), drawing on interviews with middle-level policy workers, identified a number of quite distinct styles of policy work. A key question has been 'why is the policy work being done?' Tao (2006) showed that both elected members and permanent officials in American local government use policy analysis to support programs that they favor and resist programs that they oppose. As Radin (2000) noted, policy analysis has become the 'dueling swords' that policy workers use in negotiations with other policy workers. In other words, they don't use it to generate a clear solution but to facilitate discussion.

This book focuses on policy as a *continuing process*, rather than as the production of completed outputs called 'policies,' and addresses a number of problematic aspects of policy and the processes that produced it. It highlights the tension between the perception of policy as consisting of episodes of instrumental choice ('interventions') as opposed to the continuing management of problematic aspects of social practice (which may at times involve the mobilization of state authority). Accounts of policy shifts are commonly described in terms of government intention ('the government has decided ...'), but policy workers often find that these 'intentions' involve the endorsement of painfully negotiated understandings among stakeholders. We can also see that while policy is considered an attribute and product of sovereign national

governments, the process of producing it reaches upwards (i.e., to inter- and supra-national bodies), downwards (to regional and local levels of government), and outwards (to business and non-governmental bodies), involving a range of 'non-state' bodies in the business of exercising state authority. So, there may be a variety of policy accounts in circulation, and the account in use may differ from the practitioner's experience of the process. This is because the accounts of policy practice are themselves part of the practice, and this has to be borne in mind in the analysis of policy practice.

There are similar ambiguities and tensions in the study of policy work. In the narrative of authoritative instrumentalism, policymaking is very much considered to be an official preserve: outsiders may request or propose or advise, but it is for the authoritative leaders to decide and to 'make policy.' But there is a counter-narrative that focuses on the connections between the participants, and considers governing as the product of networks that categorizes participants in various governmental or non-governmental organizations and considers policy as something that emerges from this interaction, rather than something that is independently determined by the governmental members of these networks. This counter-narrative of 'governance' has come to dominate the analyses of government in the liberal democracies of Western Europe and many other countries (Rhodes 1997; Stoker 1998; Kjaer 2004; Offe 2008), and raises many questions about the analysis of policy work, including:

- the relationships among governmental policy workers;
- relations between policy workers and non-governmental actors;
- the importance of non-governmental bodies in the construction of regimes of rule;
- how the outcomes of these linkages are 'enacted' through the forms and practices of authoritative instrumentalism, which will be recognized as 'policy.'

It focuses attention on the dynamics of these interactions and on the structures through which these linkages operate, the practices by which they are maintained, and the shared meanings, which they give rise to, and which, in turn, sustain the ongoing collaboration.

These tensions and ambiguities about policy and policy work are reflected in the self-awareness of policy workers who experience conflicting action cues. To what extent should they see their task as the application of expert knowledge, or knowledge of the field of action being governed (e.g., health or transport or migration) or of knowledge about methods for choosing (i.e., as taught in US-style policy analysis courses)? To what extent does one ne-

gotiate with representatives of other stakeholders in order to get results that will at least be tacitly accepted by the stakeholders? To what extent is it concerned with the management of the official structures and practices, which produce policy outcomes – advising leaders, and generating and processing documents? The government-employed policy workers have questions about their relationship with their non-governmental counterparts, who are likely to share their professional background and whose cooperation they hope to secure; how will the need to maintain a cooperative relationship with non-governmental bodies affect the way they relate to the government's agenda?

The structure of the book

This shows us that we have to be attentive not only to what policy workers do, but also to how they (and others) make sense of this activity, in a variety of contexts. This book aims to track the nature of policy activity and the accounts of it in different contexts. It asks what it is that policy workers do in particular situations and why is that the appropriate thing to do, what does it contribute to policy activity, what impact does it have and what can we learn from this about the skills and knowledge that policy work requires?

As we have seen, the identification of policy as a dimension of government, and of policy work as a field of practice that generates and sustains policy, is a particular account of government, which has to contend with other accounts, both in the shaping of practice and in the explanations of the practice. Therefore, our analysis begins with Colebatch's investigation into how accounts of government are framed, how 'policy' is distinguished from other aspects of governing, and how these accounts are used in the shaping of practice. Noordegraaf presents a survey of academic research on policy work, identifying the different levels of data on which researchers draw, the concerns that they investigate, and the picture of policy work that they have thus far assembled.

We then move to accounts of particular aspects of policy practice in particular contexts, and the questions that these accounts raise about policy work. Some of these are accounts of academic research (Geuijen, De Vries et al., Shore), some are accounts by policy workers of their own practices (Woeltjes, Metze), and some combine elements of both (Loeber, Sterrenberg, Williams). These accounts highlight the multiple cues and pressures experienced in policy work, how policy work is concerned with continuity, but also with disruption, the range of meanings that policy activity can have

for the various participants, and how practitioners (particularly consultants and evaluators) locate themselves in relation to these different meanings and mediate between them. There are shared elements across these accounts, as well as distinct differences, which can be divided into three particular themes:

- *Policy workers are involved in constructing shared meaning.* Metze's account of a redevelopment project shows how consultants acted to generate innovative and shared meaning among the various interested parties. In this case, the outcome was interesting to anyone outside of the circle of participants, and a relatively open learning process was possible. By contrast, De Vries, Halffman and Hoppe found that the economic forecasts of the Netherlands Central Planning Bureau were held in great esteem because of its high level of expertise and autonomy; it was considered an offering of unbiased expertise in a contested policy field. The practitioners knew that there was considerable uncertainty about these forecasts, and there was some debate about them among bureau experts and ministry officials, but it was important to keep this private and that the bureau's predictions be presented purely as the outcome of its own calculations. The most important element in the construction of meaning was the meaning attributed to the bureau's predictions by political leaders and the 'attentive public.'
- *Policy workers are involved in mediation* between different participants and agendas, where institutional questions can be particularly important. Sterrenberg analyzes a case in which 'insiders' initiated a policy review of a long-established independent institute that regularly advises the Parliament. They encountered deep-seated cultural and institutional divisions among the participants and found that policy change required new relationships between the various actors. Their policy work involved looking for windows of opportunity to foster these relationships. In Loeber's case study a new public body was to develop policies for sustainable development. It was generally accepted, but specific implications remained unclear. The policy developers mediated between the desire for change and the understanding and skills of the present practices. Meanwhile, the evaluators who were involved in the project from the outset, mediated between detachment and involvement. All of those involved in the project constructed relationships across different meanings as they discovered that they were engaged in both 'collective puzzling' and 'powering' (Heclo 1974).
- Policy is seen as a state function, while *policy actually operates beyond the nation-state*. Political leaders preside over an apparatus of state officials,

but these officials often discover that they have to reach ‘upwards’ to the international level, ‘sideways’ to business groups and non-governmental organizations, and ‘downwards’ to local communities and social groups. Sterrenberg’s chapter reveals that policy activity reaches downwards, and Loeber’s chapter shows it reaching sideways. This has been particularly evident in Europe with the development of policy at a European level through the European Union, but it can be seen throughout the world, both as ad hoc incidents such as the outbreak of SARS, which initiated an expansion of the policy surveillance role of the World Health Organization, and more systematically, in the standardization of the regulation of commercial practice through the World Trade Organization. When policy workers operate in these broader fields, they are subject to a wider range of cues for action, which have to be balanced against traditional norms of professional skills and the responsiveness to political leadership. We present two case studies that investigate how national officials respond to the challenges of European-level policy work; one is a practitioner account, the other is comprised of academic research. Woeltjes’s study of the practitioner discovers that, in this trans-national context, policy work is rarely concerned with strategy, and much more with negotiations through complex institutional provisions that allow varying degrees of maneuverability. Policy workers are engaged in the maintenance of relationships among the various players, maintaining a flow of information and engaging in an ongoing conversation through which problems are ‘discovered’ and appropriate responses are negotiated. This account is supported by the academic research of Geuijen and ‘t Hart, which stresses the importance of political preference in the domestic policy dynamic and notes its relative absence at the European level, where policy workers receive multiple cues for action without an overriding political ‘steer.’ This means that, as Tenbenschel (2008) would describe it, they are involved in a ‘no trumps’ game, in which a range of policy workers with multiple identities manage an ambiguous policy field on an ongoing basis – a process that the authors describe as ‘professional *bricolage*.’ They have to be credible in the European context without finding themselves exposed at home.

Our analysis shows that policy work is traversed by multiple, overlapping and sometimes conflicting accounts of practice, which requires policy workers to negotiate their reality within these different accounts. But differences arise between the various accounts that policy workers give of their own practice and the accounts that outside observers (i.e., academic researchers)

might give. We have already noted the distinction between output-based and activity-based accounts; we can also distinguish between accounts that are grounded in the logic of the system and those derived from the observation of activity, as well as those between 'sacred' accounts for public consumption and 'profane' accounts that are shared between trusted associates. Practitioners and academics will probably pose different questions about policy work and address them in their own ways in different timeframes. The outcome is a widespread complaint from practitioners that academic research is not 'useful,' to which the researchers respond by pointing out that their research is seldom used.

The last two chapters address this conflict between academic and practitioner knowledge. Williams (who is both an academic and a practitioner) argues that while academic and practitioner perspectives may differ significantly, they are both valid and every effort should be made to encourage communication across barriers. She reviews the criticisms that the two have of each other, and the barriers that they raise against learning from each other, and then outlines steps that could be taken to build 'a culture of engaged communication' between academics and practitioners. Shore is an academic who mainly responds to the claim that academic research is not useful and that researchers should 'learn to think and talk like policymakers.' He points out the tension between the 'authoritative instrumental' framework that practitioners are (at least publicly) committed to and the more critical views of the academic researcher. He argues that the value of academic research lies in its openness to alternative explanations which are tested against the evidence, which, in turn, yields a better understanding of the process that mobilizes the concept of policy in the management of practice.

Policy, as both a sphere of practice and as a field of knowledge, has undergone considerable changes over the last few decades, as has the type of work it is associated with. The areas that need to be analyzed are only just now being marked out, and there is currently no established body of knowledge. This book emerged from a gathering of academics and policy practitioners who wanted to combine the knowledge of the academic and the practitioner to create policy work that is more informed, and policy research that is more practical. This book is only the beginning, but we hope that it will contribute to both the study and the practice of policy work. We hope this will foster further studies that will lead to a more critical and self-aware practice.

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